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AUTHOR Schenck, Susan J.
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ABSTRACT

Minimum competency testing programs, which assess the basic skills deemed necessary for assimilation into society, have been mandated in several states. Some competency assessment devices, however, do not take handicapping conditions into account. Furthermore, disagreement over what constitutes minimum competency prevails among the various state regulations. The minimum competency requirements of 26 states were examined for inclusion of the handicapped, provision of alternate testing procedures, utilization of the individual education program (IEP) to specify minimum competency instruments, and use of separate standards or special diplomas or graduation requirements. Thirty-five percent of the regulations examined include the handicapped. Sixteen states provide directions for alternate testing procedures; 12 states make reference to the IEP and specify how it is to be used. Further, a wide range of procedures exist regarding the use of competency tests as prerequisites to graduation. Special educators must have a hand in the revision of existing regulations, and in the development of new ones, to ensure their appropriateness for the disabled. (JEH)

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Ramifications of The Minimum Competency Movement for Special Education

Susan J. Schenck, Ph.D.
The College of Charleston
Charleston, S.C. 29401

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ABSTRACT

Assessment and teaching of minimum competencies is a topic of concern to educators and parents alike. While much attention has been focused on the ability or inability of the average student to attain these stated competencies, little attention has been focused on the handicapped. The purpose of this investigation was the analysis of in-place minimum competency requirements relative to the handicapped learner. Results indicate that the unique needs of the handicapped learner are not adequately addressed.

The heart of the minimum competency movement is assessment, be it for grade promotion, accountability procedures, or determination of who does, or does not receive a standard high school diploma. Predicated on the supposition that evaluation determines the degree of mastery achieved by a student after completion of a prescribed course of study, minimum competency assessment is designed to evaluate the degree to which students possess and employ minimum skills thought necessary for successful assimilation into today's fast-paced, ever-changing society.

Based upon those skills and knowledge deemed necessary for successful assimilation into society, minimum competency assessment programs have been mandated, developed and implemented in response to public opinion (Gallup, 1979) and teacher concern (Altman, 1979). Inability on the individual's part to demonstrate competency in those competencies tapped during the assessment process may result in (1) prevention of graduation, (2) the awarding of a certificate of attendance with no diploma, or (3) the awarding of a diploma with no statement indicative of proficiency in minimum competency/basic skills.

Disagreement as to what constitutes minimum competency is apparent upon comparison of various state regulations (see A Study of Minimum Competency Testing Programs, NIE, 1979). Emphasis on basic academic skills (reading, language arts, arithmetic computation) comprise minimum competencies in several states while focus on life skills (the ability to apply academic skills to life situations such as the maintaining of a checking account balance, reading and interpreting labels) is accentuated in other states.

Still, several other states combine basic academic skills (referred to as basic skills) and life skills (referred to as minimum competencies). This lack of consistency in what establishes minimum competency poses a complex problem--that is, the possibility that a learner might be considered to have achieved minimum standards in one state but not in another. Such as the perplexity of this situation is, it becomes even more acute when one considers that in some states local educational agencies are given the option of (1) developing their own standards with or without state guidelines, (2) determining how the results of competency testing are to be utilized and (3) in several cases, deciding whether or not to participate in the minimum competency program. Thus, the problem of interstate differences as to what constitutes minimum competency is further compounded by the possibility of intrastate differences.

One report, "Basic Skills Assessment Around the Nation" (ETS, 1977), states that:

> "Having agreed that a high school diploma should mean more than a recognition of attendance, educators have set out to improve the situation, but do not always agree on the method. Some favor setting a level of minimum competency in reading, math, and language skills at a particular level, usually eighth or ninth grade, while others lean in the direction of 'survival' skills' such as dealing with application forms, driver's licenses, bank statements, and

similar items. Some districts incorporate both aspects into their proficiency-based graduation requirements."

Examination of the above statement highlights several concerns in the movement towards the establishment of minimum competencies. First, as reported, there is apparently disconcordance with regard to those skills designated as minimum competencies. Furthermore, leveling assessment devices at the eighth or ninth grade level in effect is a mechanism which prohibits the inclusion of the handicapped individual (Cawley, 1978). If minimum competency is thought necessary for minimal participation in life for the nonhandicapped, it must have equivalent implications for the handicapped. Minimum competencies provide an individual with the ability to survive in today's complex world. Therefore, the teaching and assessment of these skills in handicapped learners is of critical importance. Furthermore, such assessment and teaching must take into consideration the handicapping condition of the individual. A second consideration which holds far-reaching impact for regular and handicapped students addresses the issue of the awarding of high school diplomas contingent upon the attainment of minimum competencies as determined by performance on selected assessment devices. There would be little, or no argument that possession of a high school diploma is a minimum requirement for entry into the job market. For instance, the U. S. Department of Labor (1978) reports that successful entry into today's job market hinges upon the presence of a high school diploma. Issues concerning linking the awarding of a diploma with

minimum competencies assessment has been addressed in light of due process and equal education opportunity. A NASDSE (1979) report concluded that making the awarding of a diploma contingent upon successful completion of minimum competency assessment raises the old spectre of awarding non-standard diplomas for special students.

Pullin (1980) has argued that the inclusion of the handicapped learner in the minimum competency movement is supported by federal legislation which mandates that handicapped learners participate to the maximum extent appropriate in the regular educational programs of the schools (see 20 U. S. C. 1413 5, 45 C. F. R. 121a.550-121a.556, 45 C. F. R. 84.34). The question that must be addressed for the handicapped learner concerns the modifications that need to be incorporated in the minimum competency movement in the areas of curriculum and assessment.

Potential problems, specifically those problems of an administrative nature, accompanying inclusion of the handicapped in the minimum competency movement have been raised elsewhere (Danielson, 1978; Fenton, 1978; Gallagher & Hall, 1979; Hinesley, 1979; Kaluzny, 1979; Kennedy, 1978; Morrissey, 1978). However, to date, there has been no comprehensive investigation of the characteristics of in-place minimum competency state requirements as they pertain to the handicapped. This investigation addressed this issue.

METHOD

Sample Population

Copies of minimum competency requirements for each state were requested of state education officials in charge of minimum competency development.

A total of 26 states sent copies of their minimum competency requirements. Two (2) states responded that they were in the process of developing minimum competency requirements; while 8 states indicated that they did not have state requirements but left the decision to employ minimum competency programs to the local education agencies. Fourteen (14) states responded that they had not instituted, and were not developing, any requirements relative to minimum competency requirements.

Procedure

The minimum competency requirements of the 26 states with developed requirements were examined for (1) inclusion of the handicapped, (2) alternate testing procedures, (3) utilization of the IEP as a vehicle for specification of minimum competency instruction and assessment and (4) separate standards/special diplomas and graduation for the handicapped. To ensure consistency in the examination of the four stated components of the minimum requirements, inter-rater reliability between the two examiners was determined. Inter-rater reliability based on a random sampling of 5 state regulations was 1.00.

RESULTS

Handicapped Inclusion

Of the 26 state regulations examined, 35% included the handicapped in their state requirements, while 35% made indirect referral to the handicapped by mandating that, for the most part, the decision for inclusion remain in the domain of the local education agency. Furthermore, 30% of the states do not make reference to the handicapped.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1

Status of State Minimum Competency Requirements

States	Handicapped			
	Included	Planned for	Referred to	Not Referred to
Alabama				X
Arkansas				X
California			X	
Connecticut				X
Delaware	X			
Florida	X			
Georgia			X	
Hawaii			X	
Idaho			X	
Louisiana	X			
Maine				X
Maryland	X			
Massachusetts			X	
Michigan			X	
Missouri	X			
Nebraska			X	
Nevada				X
New Hampshire				X
New Jersey	X			
New Mexico			X	
New York	X			
North Carolina	X			
Rhode Island				X
Vermont			X	
Virginia				

Alternate Testing Procedures

Table 2 illustrates data relative to alternative testing procedures for the handicapped. The 18 state regulations indicating either inclusion of or reference to the handicapped comprised the data pool. Sixteen (16) states provide directions for alternate testing procedures. As can be seen, a variety of modifications are indicated. In each case, options to be utilized are at the discretion of the local education agency, and in several cases alternate testing procedures must be specified in the IEP. All nine states that include the handicapped in their regulations also provide directions for alternate testing strategies. The vast

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Insert Table 2 about here

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majority of the assessment modifications listed are geared to the low incidence (blind, deaf, etc.) handicapped.

IEP Utilization

Utilization of the Individual Education Program (IEP) relative to instruction and/or assessment of minimum competencies was also examined. Twelve (12) states make reference to the IEP and specify how it is to be used. Data relative to this area is contained in Table 3. Basically, the IEP is

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Insert Table 3 about here

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utilized to identify (1) competencies to be taught, (2) testing modifications and (3) exemptions that are to be employed in the case of a handicapped individual.

Table 2

Alternative Testing Strategies for Handicapped Students

States	Alternative Strategies
Delaware	"The child study team that develops the IEP must also specify the evaluative criteria for determining student attainment of objectives in order to assure that assessment of handicapped students' attainment of skills measures their achievement and not their handicap; differential assessment procedures are advised."
California	oral, typewriter, extending time limit, rating against stated criteria
Florida	appropriate modifications
Hawaii	braille, other accommodations
Georgia	large print test booklets
Idaho	special test copies to students with severe handicaps such as deafness or blindness, smaller groups
Louisiana	braille, large print tests, modifications in testing procedures are allowed
Maryland	for student with history of inability to use paper/pencil, may use other tasks to demonstrate mastery of at least 80% of material
Michigan	large print and braille
Missouri	special procedures, extended time, delay testing
Nebraska	modifications
New Jersey	large print on uncluttered pages, individual testing pre-gridded identifying information, oral responses, record in test booklet, communication device, repeat or reword directions, extend time, practice test
New York	time limit extended/waived, administered in special location, questions read to student, sign language, cued speech, audio or visual tape, answers recorded in any manner, student permitted to use calculator or abacus, braille/large type, questions omitted and credit prorated

Table 2 (continued)

Alternative Testing Strategies for Handicapped Students

States	Alternative Strategies
North Carolina	braille, large-print, audio-cassette tape, answers recorded by proctor, extended time, sign language, student marks in test booklet, administered to hospitalized/homebound
Tennessee	large print, braille, interpreter

Table 3

Utilization of IEP's in Relationship to Minimum Competency

States	Provision
California	must state if differential standards are to be employed
Delaware	must include goals, objectives and evaluative criteria including differential assessment procedures
Hawaii	indicates if student is to receive a diploma or certificate
Kentucky	indicates skill level of student in order that a proper match of test level can occur
Louisiana	decision for inclusion based on IEP
Massachusetts	must state if student is to be included
Missouri	indicates special testing procedures/exemption
New Jersey	must state if student is to be exempted from evaluation for minimum standards
New York	must consistently reflect use of alternate testing procedures and for EMH/TMH completion of an appropriate IEP leads to awarding of a certificate
North Carolina	must state if student is exempt from taking competency test
Tennessee	must state if student is to be exempted from evaluation
Vermont	must reflect multi-year plan, successful completion results in awarding of a diploma

Graduation

Additional data was gathered concerning the attainment of minimum competency as a prerequisite for high school graduation. Options range from the actual awarding of a diploma to including a seal/statement on the diploma indicating attainment of minimum competencies. Table 4 contains these data.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Standards/Diplomas

Further examination of minimum competency regulations relative to graduation revealed that at least 6 states have or are in the process of developing separate minimum competencies for the handicapped in conjunction with the awarding of non-standard diplomas. These states also provide the option for the handicapped to be administered the regular assessment instrument and, upon passing, would award the student the regular diploma. Table 5 summarizes these data. Only one state, New York, mandates that

Insert Table 5 about here.

all handicapped students with the exception of the Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH) and Trainable Mentally Handicapped (TMH) students are required to pass the minimum competency test in order to be awarded a diploma. Students identified as EMH/TMH would receive a certificate of attendance, not a diploma. It should be noted, however, current litigation in New York (Board of Education of Northport-East Northport Union Free School District vs. Ambach, Supreme Court, Albany County) is challenging the right of the state to deny the handicapped a diploma.

Table 4

Graduation and Minimum Competency

States	Implementation Year	Diploma	Certificate	Proficiency Statement	State Seal	Other
Alabama	1981					Requirements only
California	1980	X				
Delaware	1981	X				
Florida	1978	X				
Georgia	1980-83		X			
Hawaii	1983	X				
Idaho	1982				X	
Maryland	1982	X				
Nevada	----			X		
New Mexico	1980					Working on
New York	1979	X				
North Carolina	1980	X				
Tennessee	1982	X				
Vermont	1981	X				

Table 5

States Providing Separate Standards/Special Diplomas

States	Separate Standards	Special Diploma	Certificates
California [1]	X	X	
Delaware			X
Florida[1]	X	X	
Hawaii[1]	X	X	
Louisiana[2]		X	
New York	X		X(for EMH/TMH)

[1]Provide option to take regular assessment device and receive regular diploma.

[2]In some cases.

DISCUSSION

While inconsistency in what comprises minimum competency poses a problem for the intact learner, the problem is increased for the handicapped student. Special education curriculum is characterized by its lack of comprehensiveness. For the most part, curriculum content differs from local educational agency to local educational agency within states due to this lack of comprehensiveness. Where state-wide special education curriculums exist, there are often differences between states.

The minimum that is needed is (1) general consensus as to what abilities are to be assessed and if (2) those abilities are to be assessed as (a) basic academic skills (reading, language arts, mathematics), (b) functional life skills (the application of basic academic skills to everyday situations) or (c) a combination of academic and life skills.

In accordance with the setting of minimum competency standards, several issues must be addressed. First, are all handicapped learners to be required to meet the same standards as the intact learners? Second, should all handicapped learners (e.g., MR, LD, etc.) be expected to achieve the same level of proficiency? If not, what type and to what degree are different standards to be employed? If standards are not altered, are provisions to be incorporated that allow for alternate testing beyond modifications in the mode of presentation? If different standards are employed, is a different diploma awarded? While absolute answers to these questions cannot be given certain propositions can be advanced.

In all probability, modifications of the standards will be required depending upon the handicapping condition. While it may be realistic to expect the atypical learner, e.g., learning disabled, to meet the same standards as the intact learner, it might be just as unrealistic to expect the educable mentally handicapped (EMH) to meet identical standards at the higher grade levels. For the student exhibiting a specific learning problem, adjustment in the mode of presentation may be all that is required, while for the EMH learner, the content or grade level of the skill being assessed may need to be lowered in conjunction with a modification in the mode of presentation.

The IEP should be utilized as the vehicle which connects minimum competencies with instruction. Included in the IEP should be a delineation of those competencies the student is to attain proficiency in, the level of proficiency to be expected and specifications of any alternative testing strategy. Reference to those competencies the student is not expected to attain and why should also be contained in the IEP.

Competencies can be considered as those behaviors that the learner must demonstrate. The grade level content is superimposed upon the competencies. Modification can occur at either the behavior or content levels hinging upon the needs of the handicapped learner. The IEP that addresses itself to the behavioral needs of the learner rather than the content needs will allow educators to superimpose the correct level of content depending on the needs of the handicapped learner.

Development of differential standards does not address the needs of the handicapped learner. In effect, all that this procedure accomplishes is the development of a "watered-down" minimum competency program. How does one dilute the minimum? Allowing flexibility to enter into the minimum competency movement does not lower standards for the handicapped, but instead provides an avenue for them to demonstrate their ability according to ability. Flexibility will allow the handicapped learner to demonstrate proficiency in minimum competencies by (1) using alternate means of determining a competency rather than relying solely upon the traditional paper-pencil method and (2) altering the content level to meet the level of attainment expected of the student.

Should handicapped students requiring some form of modification in minimum competency assessment receive a standard diploma? Graduation, at which time diplomas are conferred, is defined in Webster's as, ". . .the completion by a student of a course of study. . ." On what basis does one issue a different diploma to a handicapped student solely because (1) he/she demonstrated proficiency in an alternate manner consistent with his/her learning style and/or (2) he/she demonstrated proficiency at a content (i.e., grade) level consistent with his/her maximum level of attainment? A student, handicapped or not, who successfully completes a prescribed course of study and subsequently demonstrates minimum competency attainment should be awarded a diploma, modifications notwithstanding.

Results of the investigation into the state of the art of minimum competency regulations as they pertain to the handicapped has highlighted

several problems. Examination of the data reveals that the needs of the handicapped individual in the area of minimum competency are not adequately being addressed either in the area of instruction or assessment.

A few states have addressed the issue by including the handicapped within the regulations governing this current movement. Most of these same states have also made provisions for utilization of alternative testing strategies. However, in most cases regulations are laden with loopholes so that while, on paper, these states have met with the letter of the law (Section 504, P.L. 94-142), options exist for circumventing this thorny issue. This is done either by providing procedures for exempting handicapped individuals and/or the development of alternative standards and diplomas. Furthermore, in most cases, utilization of alternate testing strategies are left to the discretion of the local school agency or the guidelines are so stringent they actually preclude use of alternate strategies. One state (to remain unnamed), for instance, requires that the handicapped student's individual education program (IEP) consistently make note (and by implication, assume consistent employment of) of alternate strategies to be employed. Schenck (1979) and Schenck and Levy (1979) demonstrated that the IEP has serious problems especially in the area of relating assessment data to instruction. By inference, such problems can be said to preclude the documentation of alternative teaching strategies, let alone alternative testing strategies in the IEP.

Still in the embryonic stage, special educators must have a hand in the revision of existing and newly developing regulations. Several issues

must be addressed. First, a philosophy that supports minimum competency assessment for special populations must be developed. Second, assessment must be linked to the unique learning styles of the handicapped. Provisions must be made to distinguish content (e.g., reading level) from behavior (e.g., competencies in reading). In an attempt to meet this end, the investigators of this study are currently involved in a content analysis and behavioral analysis of minimum competencies currently in-place. It will be necessary to develop curricula experiences which co-mingle minimum competencies (reading) with life skills (reading a job application) at different levels of complexity (e.g., second grade reading level, fourth grade reading level, etc.). Assessment devices which correspond to curricula experiences and capitalize upon learning style need to be developed.

Handicapped individuals are citizens of society. In order to succeed in society, they must be equipped with those minimum competencies/basic skills required for all members of society.

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